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Case report

Posterior sternoclavicular epiphyseal fracture-dislocation:
Case report and review of literatureAlan Perdreau^{*}, Benoit Bingen, Louis Gossing, Étienne Lejeune, Alain Beugnies

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ABSTRACT

Posteriorly displaced physal fractures of the medial clavicle are relatively rare injuries in the growing skeleton and are often confused with the posterior dislocations of the sternoclavicular joint (SCJ). Frequently, these initially undiagnosed due to variable clinical presentation and inadequate visualisation of the joint on plain radiographs. This failure of diagnosis or delayed treatment may lead to serious complications though secondary injuries of mediastinal structures.

We present a case report of a 16-year-old male with posterior sternoclavicular epiphyseal fracture-dislocation without vasculonervous injury that occurred in basketball training. The correct diagnosis required multiple modalities over two emergency department visits. Computed tomography with intravenous contrast was the imaging modality of choice for diagnosis. Treatment consisted of attempts at closed reduction, which was not successful. Open reduction was performed with relocation of the clavicle into the periosteal sleeve followed by strong suture material. We have reviewed the literature to provide an insight with regards to correct diagnosis and management of this injury.

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1. Introduction

Posterior sternoclavicular dislocation (PSCD) is an uncommon injury that occurs generally during high-energy trauma [1,2] or sporting activities [3–13]. On account of late closure of the medial clavicular epiphysis, posterior epiphyseal disruption must be taken into consideration in every patient younger than 25 years [3–5,8,9,14–18]. While true PSCD can occur in skeletally immature patients [8,19], the majority of the injuries are posteriorly displaced fracture of the medial clavicular physis [16,18,20–22]. Often these injuries go unrecognised at the time of presentation due to their relative infrequency, paucity of physical examination findings, and difficulty in interpreting plain radiographs [2,5,6,8,10,11,16,18,23,24]. This failure of diagnosis or delayed treatment may lead to serious complications though secondary injuries of mediastinal structures [2,3,8,23,25–34]. We present a rare case of posterior sternoclavicular epiphyseal fracture-dislocation that occurred in a young basketball player, which was not recognised at his initial presentation in emergency department. The purpose of this article is to share our experience and to review the literature with regards to correct diagnosis and management of this injury.

2. Case

A 16-year-old right hand-dominant boy was admitted in our emergency department with a shoulder injury during basketball training. After attempting to block a shot, he fell onto his right posterolateral shoulder.

He described immediate pain in his shoulder and inability to move it without significant anterior chest discomfort. He denied any paresthesia, weakness, dyspnoea, dysphagia, or dysphonia.

His initial vital signs were: temperature 36.7 °C, heart rate 48 breaths/min, blood pressure 133/67 mmHg and respiratory rate 16 breaths/min. On physical examination, he presented with severe shoulder pain, holding his arm in an internally rotated and adduction position. There was no palpable deformity over the shoulder but tenderness was localised at the distal sternocleidomastoid muscle. He could externally and internally rotate his arm but could not tolerate minimal passive abduction of the shoulder. His neurovascular examination result of the distal extremity was normal.

A 3-view shoulder X-ray was ordered (Fig. 1) and revealed no bony injuries or articular dislocations.

The patient was discharged in a broad-arm sling with a diagnosis of shoulder sprain and sternocleidomastoid muscle haematoma. He was referred to the orthopaedics clinic in one week.

He returned to the same emergency department 48 h later complaining of persistent right shoulder pain. On examination, he had tenderness to palpation over the medial end of his right clavicle. When viewed from the side, the right sternoclavicular

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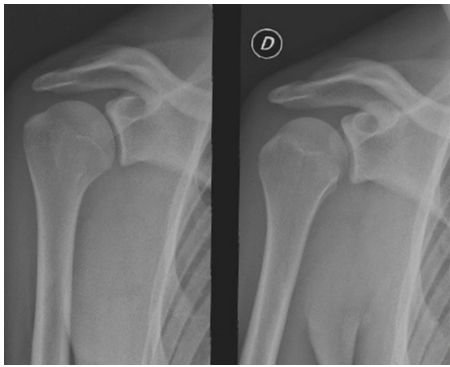


Fig. 1. Anteroposterior radiograph of the right shoulder from the first admission.



Fig. 2. Anteroposterior radiograph of the right clavicle. Note the markedly displaced medial end of clavicle (arrow) compared to the sternum (S).

joint (SCJ) was swelling and less prominent than the contralateral side, giving rise to the suspicion of PSCD.

Plain radiographs of the right clavicle (Fig. 2) revealed a slight superior displacement of the medial end suggesting a sternoclavicular dislocation.

CT scan of the upper chest with intravenous contrast confirmed posterior displacement of the medial end of the right clavicle with an epiphyseal fracture. Meticulous attention revealed, a small bony fragment just anterior to the medial right clavicular end corresponding to avulsed fragment of metaphysis attached to the undisplaced anterior periosteum (Fig. 3A and B). There was no evidence of secondary injuries of the mediastinal structures however clavicular head abutted but did not penetrate the brachiocephalic artery (Fig. 4A and B).

After obtaining parental informed consent, the patient was taken to operating room for reduction under general anaesthesia with a thoracic surgeon on standby notification.

In first time, closed reduction technique was attempted with the patient in supine position with a sandbag placed between the scapulae. Longitudinal traction was applied to the right arm against countertraction in an abducted and slightly extended position, and the medial end of the clavicle was pulled in the anterior direction manually. Combined manoeuvres could not affect a reduction and open procedure was realised in a second time.

A transverse incision centred over the SCJ was used. The dissection was carried out through the platysma to the level of the periosteum. Periosteal elevation was performed in a lateral to medial direction over the clavicle, carefully exposing the medial end of the clavicle and SCJ. With this exposure, posterior epiphyseal disruption of the medial clavicle with metaphyseal fragment (Salter-Harris type II injury) was clearly identified. The clavicle had not adhered to the great vessels, and the reduction was performed without complications using a towel clip. The stabilisation was obtained using No.1 polyester suture passed from the manubrium/epiphyseal piece into the medial clavicle through bone tunnels. The periosteal sleeve was then repair with

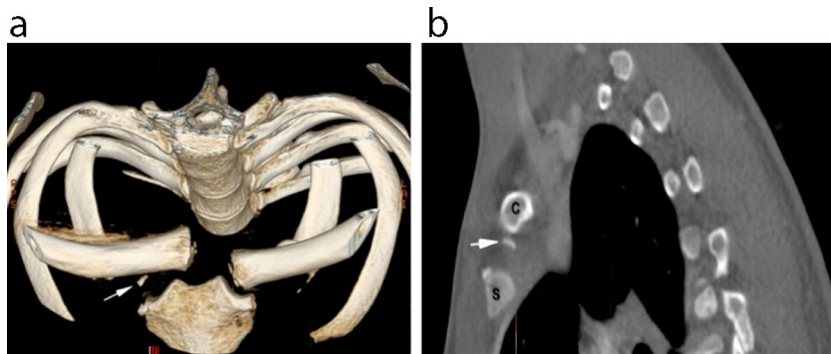


Fig. 3. (A) Three-dimensional computer tomographic reconstruction showing complete posterior dislocation of right sternoclavicular joint with evidence of a tiny bony fragment (arrow) near the clavicle head suggesting an epiphyseal fracture. (B) Sagittal view of superior chest computed tomography (CT) scan showing posteriorly displacement of the right clavicle (C) with metaphyseal fragment (arrow). Also shown is the sternum (S).

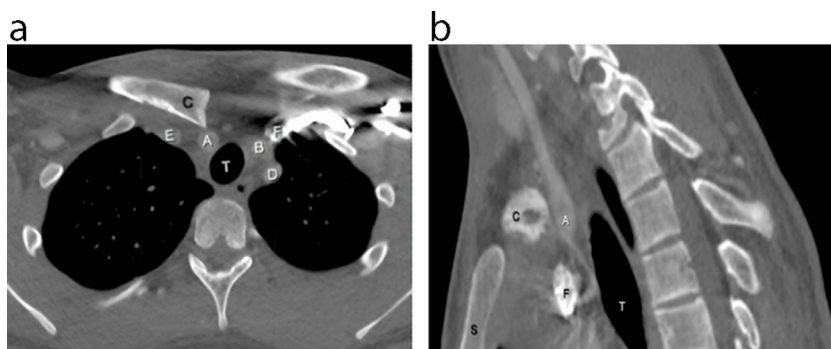


Fig. 4. (A) Axial view of the superior chest CT scan showing medial clavicle (C) abutting the brachiocephalic artery (A). Also are shown the trachea (T), left common carotid artery (B), left subclavian artery (D), right and left brachiocephalic vein (E and F). (B) Sagittal view of superior chest CT scan showing the medial end of the right clavicle (C) in contact with the brachiocephalic artery (A). Are also represented the trachea (T), sternum (S) and the left brachiocephalic vein (F).

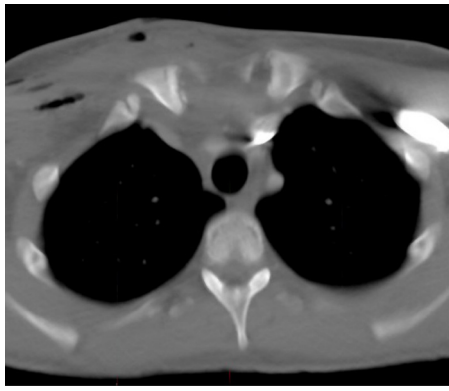


Fig. 5. Axial view of the superior chest CT scan on day 2 after surgery showed a complete reduction of the epiphyseal fracture.

polyglactic acid suture and the physical fracture was further stabilised with costoclavicular ligament repair, which has been secured by costoclavicular cerclage in PDF. Stability was subsequently tested with gentle ranging of the upper extremity and loading of the SCJ.

Postoperatively, the patient had a repeat CT scan to confirm the reduction of the lesion and the normal anatomy of the mediastinal structures (Fig. 5).

The patient was discharged home on the third postoperative day with figure-of-eight splint to be worn for a total of 4 weeks. After this time, sling immobilisation was continued for an additional 2 weeks, with initiation of physical therapy for gentle passive and active range-of-motion exercises. Patient was permitted to return to sports, 3 months postoperatively.

3. Discussion

3.1. History

The first case of PSCD was described by Sir Cooper [35] in 1824, and subsequently by various authors in the form of case reports and short series of cases [2,5,7,8,21]. Though there have been numerous cases on this injury in adults, little has been published on PSCD or posterior sternoclavicular epiphyseal fracture-dislocation in children and adolescents [2,4–6,9,14,16,18,21,27,36–38].

3.2. Anatomy

Anatomically, the SCJ is a diarthrodial joint with a saddle shape that link the upper extremity to the thorax. Less than half of the medial clavicle articulates with the sternum, making it unstable and the most incongruous joint in the body. However, the stability is supported by a disc, a fibrous capsule anteriorly and posteriorly, and by the anterior and posterior sternoclavicular, interclavicular and costoclavicular ligaments [36,39]. The posterior ligaments are significantly stiffer and a 50% greater force is required for a posterior, than an anterior dislocation [33]. This is explained, in part, why the anterior dislocation is seen much more frequently, with a 20:1 ratio [40].

In children or young adults, the medial clavicle epiphysis is the last epiphyseal centre to appear and the last to fuse. Generally, it ossifies around 18–20 years of age, and fuses to the clavicle metaphysis around 23–25 years [38,41,42]. It is well known that up until the time of fusion, the growth plate is the weakest part of joint and is more commonly injured than ligamentous structures. For this reason, children and young adults will typically demonstrate the Salter-Harris type I or II fracture while adults with completed skeletal maturation will characteristically present with

a true sternoclavicular dislocation [18]. There are no clinical sign to distinguish one condition to the other, and radiographic diagnosis is often difficult as well. The correct diagnosis is made during open reduction or suspected after detailed analysis of the CT scan [14,18,22,43,44]. This is why many of the reports do not make a clear distinction between these two injuries, especially when managed nonoperatively.

3.3. Frequency

Dislocations and epiphyseal fractures to the SCJ are uncommon injuries making up 1.2–4% of shoulder injuries [14,45,46]. PSCD make up <1% of all dislocations [2,37]. Less than 1% of children's fractures involve the medial end of the clavicle [18,41].

3.4. Mechanisms of injury

Sternoclavicular injury with posterior displacement is seen most commonly in high-energy trauma such as motor vehicle accidents [1,2] but has been reported in sporting activities with contact [2–12,38]. As in this case, the mechanism is often a posterolateral injury to the shoulder, causing a lever mechanism to the medial clavicular head, forcing displacement posterior to the sternum [38,41,47]. A direct anterior-to-posterior force to the medial clavicle is less frequently responsible for posterior dislocation [2,3,36]. Atraumatic dislocations are rare; however three cases of spontaneous posterior dislocation have been reported in the literature in patients with generalised laxity [48–51].

3.5. Clinical findings

Clinical diagnosis is often missed because of diffuse pain and as swelling of overlying tissue hides the deformity. Pain radiates laterally to the shoulder and up to the neck and is made worse with shoulder movement. The sternoclavicular area is usually tender to palpation but gap is often subtle and may remain unrecognised [5,6,10,14,16,18,52]. Sometimes, a posterior displacement is misdiagnosed as an anterior displacement with prominent anterior swelling [41]. Other clinical findings include the shoulder being held forward while the ipsilateral elbow supported by the opposite hand and the head bent towards the affected side in an attempt to lessen pain [6,7,53,54].

3.6. Diagnostic imaging

PSCD and posterior sternoclavicular epiphyseal fracture-dislocation are commonly difficult to assess with standard plain film studies [9]. Anteroposterior radiographs are of limited utility because the clavicle dislocates perpendicular to the plain of the film and superimposed ribs or mediastinal structures obscure the SCJ. Asymmetry between the medial ends of the clavicle seen at the standard chest radiogram usually indicates a sternoclavicular dislocation, although this may not be well visualised in subtle dislocations [2,55].

Rockwood or Serendipity view [14,21], Hobbs view [56,57] and Heinig's projection are the specific plain radiograms for evaluating the SCJ dislocation [18,20] and may aid to the diagnosis. However such specialised views can be difficult to perform reliably and are not to be widely practised.

CT scan are the most appropriate imaging method to confirm the diagnosis and evaluating the mediastinal structures and should be used whenever there is a suspicion about SCJ dislocation. Frequently on the CT scan the clavicular metaphyseal displacement is misinterpreted as sternoclavicular dislocation because clavicular epiphysis is not ossified. However, meticulous attention

can reveal bony fragments anterior to the posteriorly dislocated clavicle [2,4,9,18,52] or callus formation [18] perfectly consistent with epiphyseal fracture, but not with dislocation. In the event of suspected vascular injury, intravenous contrast may be used to enhance CT interpretation.

Ultrasound has also been described to be of benefit both in the diagnosis of injury at the bedside [24] and in judging the adequacy of closed reductions [24].

Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) can assess for neurovascular injuries if symptoms are present after reduction. An other advantage of the MRI, is the visualisation of epiphysis and the growth plate integrity [16].

4. Complications

The repercussions for missed or delayed diagnoses of posterior displacement of the medial end of the clavicle can have significant complications, due to the effects on the vital structures that are in close proximity: the trachea, oesophagus, lungs, great vessels, and brachial plexus. About 30% of patients with posterior-directed medial clavicle injuries will have concomitant thoracic injuries [26,58–60]. These injuries resulting from the acute trauma or from continued pressure of the medial clavicle on the retrosternal structures include airway compromise [5,29,30,58], tracheo-oesophageal fistula [27], pneumothorax [32], compression or dilacerations of great vessels [3,7,8,23,25,26,31], brachial plexus lesions and thoracic outlet syndrome [27,28,34,44].

5. Management

Some authors have proposed that the medial clavicular physal fractures may remodel with the time and therefore do not require closed or open reduction [41].

Traditionally, closed reduction is the treatment of choice in the acute PSCD and posterior sternoclavicular epiphyseal fracture-dislocation without any mediastinal injury. This is attempted under general anaesthesia in operating room with cardiothoracic surgeons present and aware of the procedure, because of the proximity of vital structures [23,24,61].

Different techniques have been described but are seldom successful if applied more than 48 h after dislocation has taken place [17]. The abduction traction technique [20] is the most effective procedure and should be done with the patient in a prone position with a sandbag between the shoulder blades. Progressive flexion and traction on the abducted arm are applied and, if this is not sufficient for reduction, the clavicle is grasped with a sterile towel clip to apply direct anterior traction. The reduction is confirmed with audible or palpable click. The adduction traction technique has been described in which traction is applied to the arm in adduction, while a downward pressure is exerted on the shoulders [21,44]. Other investigators have put a knee between the shoulders of the seated patient and, by pulling back on both shoulders, have accomplished a reduction. Often, PSCD and posterior sternoclavicular epiphyseal fracture-dislocation tend to be stable once reduced [19,53].

Open reduction and internal fixation is typically reserved if closed reduction is unsuccessful or if subluxation persists [5,8,14,16,18]. Open reduction is also recommended after 7–10 days by some authors [38,41,42], because adhesions between medial end of the clavicle to the mediastinal structures may form during this time. This is not an operation to be taken lightly, as great care is needed to avoid damage to important structures and the majority of surgeons like to have cardiothoracic team on side before starting such procedures.

Various stabilisation techniques have been described in the literature, using hardware devices, soft-tissue reconstruction with tendon graft or fascia lata flap, synthetic ligament and bone

sutures. But the optimal method of stabilisation has not yet been established. However, fixation with Kirschner wires or Steinmann pins have the potential for migration towards vital structures with catastrophic complications [20,62–68] and are therefore not recommended. The use of a basler-plate seems an interesting alternative and permits early movement, but requires the removal of the plate at 3 months to prevent dislocations of the hook or widening of the insertion point in the manubrium. Introduction of the hook into the manubrium can damage the epiphyseal plate in growing children and the SCJ, risking subsequent arthrosis.

According to some authors [5,7,8,22], we have opted for suture stabilisation technique by employing bone-to-bone fixation that is safe and effective. The goal is to protect on the one hand the periosteal repair in cases of medial clavicular epiphyseal fracture-dislocations and on the other hand the costoclavicular and sternoclavicular ligament repairs in cases of SCJ dislocations. The integrity of costoclavicular ligament and periosteum is crucial to prevent instability in all instances. In case of residual posterior instability, we advocate use of additional ligamentous repair through local ligamentoplasty by mean of subclavius [69] or sternocleidomastoid tendon [70].

Postoperatively, the shoulder should be held back with a figure-of-eight dressing for 4–6 weeks to allow ligament healing. A graduated progressive functional rehabilitation programme is recommended with an aim to return to sport in 3–6 months.

6. Conclusion

PSCD and posteriorly epiphyseal fracture of the medial clavicle should be always considered in a young trauma patient with pain, swelling, or deformity over the SCJ. On account of the potential for serious complications with vital mediastinal structures, a prompt diagnosis and treatment are required. Despite normal radiography, a CT scan should be obtained in all cases, with suspicion of medial clavicular injury, to confirm and define the exact pattern of injury. If closed reduction fails, we recommend open anatomical reduction and internal fixation by bone suture material associated with periosteum and ligament repairs.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors report no conflict of interests.

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